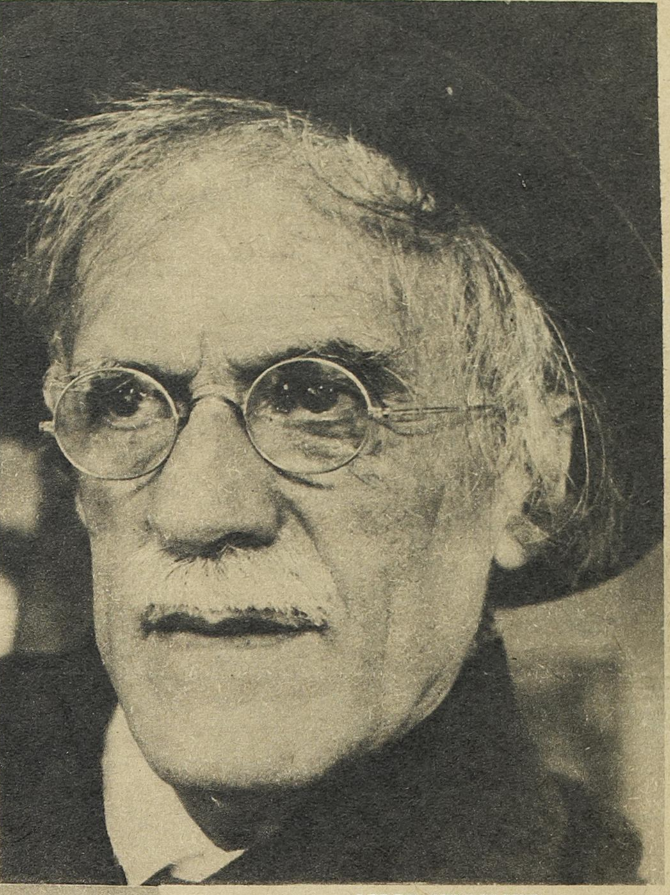
What Is "291"?

A Question Propounded Thirty Years Ago by Alfred Stieglitz, Art Sponsor, Still Awaits the Final Answer

By Ralph Flint



ALFRED STIEGLITZ
A Photograph, by Dorothy Norman, of a Patron, Participant and Protagonist of Art Expressions, Particularly in America

Back in 1914, some 60 artists, writers, critics and observers of the American scene were invited by Alfred Stieglitz to contribute to a special number of Camera Work, which he was then editing, to be devoted to answering the question, "What is '291'?"

Many and varied were the responses and each, in its own way, was correct enough. It was variously labeled a "laboratory," an "oasis," a "fact," "something accomplished," a "challenge," and so on. One contemporary critic saw in "291" an "outward resemblance to a meeting place for avowed 'enemies of society,'" another labeled it the "menace of tomorrow," while a third set it down as an "offense in the eyes of the ossified."

From one observer, more perspicacious than the rest perhaps, came the reply, "It is given to no man to fasten a single definition upon '291.'" The world at large, asked to define the subject under discussion, would in all probability have said that it was Alfred Stieglitz; but in the foreword to this special and now historic number of Camera Work, Stieglitz took particular pains to state his position. "Some say 'tis I. *I know it is not I*. What is it?"

As a matter of plain fact, "291" was a small, unpretentious room, some 15 feet square, located at 291 Fifth Avenue, in New York City, in which Stieglitz had been holding exhibitions of photography and painting and sculpture since 1905, although in the beginning this exhibition center was known as the Photo-Secession Gallery. Put on without ostentation or noisy acclaim, yet containing enough aesthetic TNT to flutter the academic dovecotes and start reverberating down the years a credo of faith in the creative artist and a challenge to lethargic acceptance of "popular" art, these exhibitions were designed to awaken the public to the importance of art, no matter what form it might take, as a vital force in society and as an issue worth fighting for.

With such a fearless advocate for freedom of expression as Stieglitz—himself an artist of original perception and accomplishment in his chosen field of photography—it was inevitable that, from the first, "291" should have been the rallying point for those kindred workers whose efforts were bringing about a definite renaissance movement in the arts, not only in America but in Europe as well.

It is a matter of historic record now that the early masters of the new art movement in Paris—Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Rodin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picabia, Brancusi, Braque, Rousseau—had their first American representation under the Stieglitz aegis, and this was a considerable time before the modern movement had gotten under way in America.

As far back as 1908, five years previous to the famous New York Armory exhibition which did so much to awaken Manhattan to the fact that the new art was something to be taken seriously, Stieglitz set the ball of modern art rolling in America with his exhibition of Rodin drawings. A few months later he gave the town another "shock" with a series of drawings by Matisse which he hung in all good faith with the times that he saw, quite clearly, were leading up to a new aesthetic freedom.

In this humble little home of the arts was also held the first showing in the United States of African sculpture, and it was Stieglitz who put on the first display of children's art. It is interesting to note that the show of Matisse sculpture held at "291" was the first showing anywhere of this phase of that artist's work, and that both Picasso and Brancusi were given one-man exhibitions at this Fifth Avenue art center for the first time anywhere. Japanese prints, etchings and drawings by Gordon Craig, and paintings by the Italian futurist, Gino Severini, were among the other works by foreign artists shown during the years that Stieglitz held forth at "291."

From 1907 until 1917, when "291" as a place ceased to exist, an important group of American artists became associated with Stieglitz, notably John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Elie Nadelman, Max Weber, Marius de Zayas, Marsden Hartley, Arthur B. Carles and Abraham Walkowitz. The first Marin exhibition was held in 1909. He has continued to exhibit each year under the Stieglitz banner until the present time. Miss O'Keeffe first appeared at "291" in 1916 with a group of charcoal drawings that today still stand among her most inspired performances.



Courtesy of An American Place

NOVEMBER DAYS—OUTSKIRTS OF MUNICH, 1884
A Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz During His Student Days, Indicating His Early Interest in the Art of the Camera

In the interval between the closing of "291" and the opening of the Intimate Gallery in 1925, Stieglitz continued to hold exhibitions of his own work and the paintings and sculpture of those who had become part of his group at various New York galleries. In 1929, Stieglitz opened An American Place at 509 Madison Avenue, at which address he has continued his work of demonstrating the essential purpose of "291" through regular exhibitions and publications and manifestos from time to time.

While the work of exemplification goes on, the question, "What is '291'?" still remains before the house. Three years ago an answer—perhaps the most significant to date—to this pertinent question was brought forth by a group of writers in the form of "America and Alfred Stieglitz," a book-of-the-month item for the Literary Guild, in which was set forth from 25 different angles the life history of Alfred Stieglitz, and so designed that it told a consecutive tale of his career and the part that he has played in shaping the aesthetics of American art.

Such writers as Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, William Carlos Williams, Harold Rugg, Paul Rosenfeld, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Dorothy Brett and John Marin helped shape this collective portrait of a man who has lived a long life consecrated to the art of living and to art that is alive, that will live. All along the line he has shown by proof positive that his credo and his challenge have been rooted in the lasting verities and that his contribution to the cultural values of this century in America is of major importance.

The story of Alfred Stieglitz, in its final analysis, is therefore the story of modern art in the United States, necessarily begun by the French group, but taken over by those American artists to whom freedom of expression was the essence of their being and their art. Year by year the answer to his question, "What is '291'?" continues to be answered in one way or another, by this painter or that, by some worker in the allied arts or maybe by some humble citizen who has glimpsed the man himself, his sharply focused nature, his elemental simplicity, his courage, his vision.

For his gallery is not a gallery in the commercial sense; it is a place that belongs to all who care to use it. He is not a dealer in art in the ordinary sense of the word, although he deals in those values which end in becoming art. At the time of the Brooklyn Museum's show of Modern French Masters in 1921, Stieglitz contributed one of his rarely penned statements to the museum quarterly, in which he pointed out that he "was not an authority on any subject. Merely a student. One still actively learning. Everywhere. Every moment." This is a statement that still holds good in 1937.

In opening his current season at An American Place, Stieglitz has brought together a collection of items that figured during those early years at "291"—drawings, prints, photographs, paintings in oil and water color, pamphlets—a collection of memorabilia that forms an exhibition which the passing years have given a historical significance.

The plain gray walls of this severely ordered office-building gallery, the seemingly unpretentious nature of the exhibition, the absence of high-pressure publicity might lead one who merely follows the leader to overlook this "Beginnings of '291'" show that Stieglitz has brought forth from his treasure chest. Yet this exhibition, seeking nothing, yet telling within a small compass so much to those with eyes to see—and, if he is in a talkative mood, with ears to hear—is something that should not be overlooked.

The hand that Stieglitz has held out all these years to creative workers in every field, the hand that has in so many cases made their survival possible, is still held out. The question that he first propounded back in 1914 is still on his lips, and it will be sounding so long as there is an artist to hear and answer.